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## **A Preliminary Research on Self-Initiated Expatriation as Compared to Assigned Expatriation**

### **UNE RECHERCHE PRÉLIMINAIRE SUR L'EXPATRIATION AUTO-INITIÉE PAR RAPPORT À L'EXPATRIATION AFFECTÉE**

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**Abstract:** The ever changing complexity of global staffing calls for a fundamental reassessment of international assignment, among which self-initiated expatriation is one of the burgeoning patterns. This paper discusses the basic characteristics of self-initiated expatriates compared with those who known as assigned expatriates, and finds out that the new born group of expatriates not only differ with those assigned expatriates in the visible, or called the “outside” part, as the technical skill set, career boundary, career stages, financial support, and time boundary, etc; but more important, the inherent, or called the “inner” part, as for motivation, information focus and value concern, and so on. Moreover, it reveals the so far neglected cross-cultural adjustment abilities of SIE and gives advice for human resource management practice.

**Keywords:** Expatriation; Self-initiated expatriates; Assigned expatriates

**Résumé:** La complexité du personnel global est en constante évolution et elle exige une réévaluation fondamentale de l'affectation internationale, dont l'expatriation auto-initiée est l'un des modèles en plein essor. Cet article examine les caractéristiques de base des expatriés auto-initiés par rapport à ceux qui sont connus sous le nom des expatriés affectés, et découvre que le nouveau groupe des expatriés diffèrent avec des expatriés affectés non seulement dans le visible, ou la partie extérieure autrement dit, comme compétences techniques définies, contraintes de carrière, étapes de carrière, soutien financier et limite de temps, etc, mais ce qui est plus important, c'est l'inhérent, ou sous l'appellation la partie «interne», comme motivation, information ciblée, conception des valeurs, et ainsi de suite. En outre, il révèle les capacités de l'adaptation interculturelle des expatriés auto-initiés, ce qui est pour longtemps négligé et donne des conseils pour la pratique de gestion des ressources humaines.

**Mots-clés:** Expatriation; expatriés auto-initiés; expatriés affectés

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The last decades have witnessed the changing of organizations from multinational to global perspective, which has lead to the integration of globe human resource market. The international management literature has gained a magnificent increase in international assignments research, where expatriate management remains a critical concern (Collings & Scullion, 2006; Lazarova, 2006; Stahl & Björkman, 2006). According to the existing literature, staffing issues are becoming more and more complex in the international environment, inter alia: changing HR strategies for effective implementation of global strategies during international mergers and strategic alliances; the high select ratio of qualified international managers, especially for emerging markets where fierce competition exists, and the utilization of knowledge flow brought by those global talents (Schuler, et.al., 2004; Minbaeva & Michailova, 2004; Evans, et.al., 2002).

While the context for managing international staffing has altered significantly, research suggests that many MNCs continue to underestimate the complexities involved (Tung, 1998). Issues surrounding the conventional expatriate assignment (EA) keep on rising due to high costs and low returns (Morley & Heraty, 2004; Scullion & Brewster, 2001). Some of the old challenges consist of expatriate failure, costs and performance evaluation. Others like increasing demand for expatriates in a broader range of organizations, especially on emerging markets; low supply for global career and specifically dual careers, and the impact of 9/11, can be considered newer challenges (Collings et al., 2007).

As a result, organizations and academics must take a more strategic view of global staffing arrangements, in order to maximize their use of talented human resources (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Selmer & Leung, 2003; Paik, Segaud & Malinowski, 2002). One of the new key themes is the emergence of self-initiated expatriate (SIE) assignments, which means “someone who chose to leave (their) homeland to live or work in another country, usually for a long period of time” (Vance, 2005). Researchers argue that SIEs may have different motivations than traditional assignees, vary on financial support origins, personal skill set, career stages, and other issues (Collings et al., 2007; Thomas et al., 2005; Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Inkson et al. 1997). The increasing number of SIEs is one of the options offered to organizations to enlarge the candidate pool for international positions at a lower cost than traditional expatriates. However, there is a dearth of empirical research both on the individual issues faced by SIEs on how to establish themselves in the new environment and on the HR issues facing organizations who seek to employ them.

In order to make a holistic view of the underestimated SIE phenomena, this research will try to explore the basic characteristics of SIE experiences through an extended review of the existing literature.

## **2. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SIE**

Within the globalization, the nature of an international assignment is ever changing, from the concept of a traditional company-assigned expatriation, to a more diverse set of international employees (Capellen & Janssens, 2005). Professionals nowadays often initiate their own expatriation for overseas experiences, more work opportunities and a bunch of other factors (Myers & Pringle, 2005; Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar-Shraivas, 2004), which reflect the basic differences of company expatriates and SIEs. A seminal article by Inkson et al. (1997) was the first to address such differences. Since then, numerous calls come out for more information on this group (Bonache et al., 2007; Banai and Harry, 2005).

### **2.1 The extrinsic factors**

#### **2.1.1 Career assignment**

Prior to this decade, the international mobility happened, to the most part, on expatriate assignment, which referred to the deployment of expatriates in international subsidiaries by companies (Suutari and Brewster, 2000). However, recent research in the US shows that due to the current international climate and continued concerns about terrorist attacks post-911, potential international assignees remain reluctant to go overseas (Konopaske & Werner, 2005). Yet MNCs must more than ever before encourage staff to work abroad to better understand the global markets and to develop the skills required to work effectively across cultures (Collings, et al., 2007). Thus the potentially bigger population “who relocates voluntarily to a foreign

country on his or her own initiative, independently of any employer and without organizational assistance” (Crowley-Henry, 2007) calls for deep consideration.

### **2.1.2 Career boundary**

For most overseas assignments, expatriates will subsequently return to another position in the same company in the original country and hopefully, the experience will result in career development for the individual (Inkson, 1997). However, as market becomes increasingly globalised, the movement of labor across organizational and national boundaries become flexible and permeable (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006). In this era, boundaries between and within companies are dissolving (Inkson, 1997), and careers are becoming increasingly fluid, characterized more and more by temporary assignments and centered on building skills across companies rather than ascending hierarchies within companies. Research illustrates professionals who are self-initiate expatriated are undergoing a shift from organization-based career to one that is more independent, “boundaryless”, which denotes the very concept of SIE (Fitzgerald & Howe-Walsh, 2008; Yan et al, 2002; Arthur et al., 1999). In the traditional career perspective, individuals were expected to stay within the same organization to gain seniority with time and age (Arthur and RousSIEau, 1996; Arthur, 1994). While in the boundaryless career, they are taking their own responsibility for career development. They typically search for opportunities outside the company or country (Feldman and Ng, 2007; Hudson and Inkson, 2006), replace corporate security or intervention with autonomy and flexibility (Thorn, 2009). Birscoe and Hall (2006) consider the boundaryless career in broad terms along “dimensions of physical and/or psychological mobility”. Evidently, the physical mobility would not only be accompanied by, but also initiated from, the changing psychological focus on transforming one’s own career.

### **2.1.3 Career Stage**

Early research showed that SIE was popular among young people who care for overseas experience (OE) rather than seize the opportunity to improve their career opportunities (Myers and Inkson, 2003). In this case, employment tends to be ad hoc and casual, usually at a beginning or relatively low career stage. They sometimes obtain more permanent employment as a result of serendipitous networking arises. Later, Myers and Pringle (2005) developed the term “free agents” as refer to people who are usually older than the OE stereotype and self initiate for a wide range of reasons, including planned career development, financial improvement, or simply because they now have the opportunity to seek out new experiences (Helyer, 2004). Thus the career stages for SIE are actually quite wide spread, covering all levels from beginner to seniority.

Whereas Inkson et al. (1997) refer to SIEs as individuals in their early career phase with mainly recreational and social motives, Suutari and Brewster (2000) later-on expanded the group of self-initiated foreign expatriates by more experienced people who deliberately chose an international career.

### **2.1.4 Time boundary**

Assigned expatriates always leave their home countries for two or three years (Thorn, 2009). After a period from a few months to several years duration, the person returns home, seeking to resume his or her career, or possibly start a new one (Inkson, 1997). On the contrary, SIEs are hired as locals in the foreign country. In addition, SIEs are not repatriated to their home-country organization but decide for themselves whether and when they return to their home country (Crowley-Henry, 2007; Suutari and Brewster, 2000). They feel they themselves have a high impact on the course of their career, their current organization being only an intermediate step (Biemann & Andresen, 2010).

### **2.1.5 Financial Status**

As those who choose to expatriate by themselves, typically, he or she will save money to bankroll the trip. Thus, SIE is, by definition, a personal odyssey, initiated and resourced by the SIElf (Inkson, 1997). They do not like their comparatives, the assigned expatriates, who always have company salary and expenses, plus funded travel and family settling down as well.

To Summarize, the basic extrinsic factors of an SIE compared to AE can be listed as follows:

**Table 1: Self-initiated expatriation versus Assigned expatriation**

	Self-initiated expatriation	Assigned expatriation
Career assignment and finance	By the expatriates themselves	By the company
Career stages	All stages	Always with developed careers and higher positions
Career boundary	Mobile across organizations	Within the organization
Time boundary	Unknown time period	Fixed term

(Summarized by the author from literature review)

## **2.2 The intrinsic factors**

The fundamental characteristic that distinguishes SIE international workers and expatriate assignees is the initiator behind the decision to work internationally (Biemann & Andresen, 2010). Far less attention has been devoted to the differences in their individual orientations and motivations. The career orientation of SIEs as a key driver that impacts the SIEs' decision to work abroad and is therefore a distinguishing feature of SIEs compared to AEs (Biemann & Andresen, 2010).

### **2.2.1 Motivation**

As for the assigned expatriation, Stahl et al., (2002) found that most of the German managers accepted a position in foreign countries not because they wanted to, but because of the fear of ruining their current job. Nearly 70 per cent of the respondents believed they "could not refuse a posting more than once without this having a negative impact on future career with that company". Thus the initiative for SIE differs quite a lot from the traditional one (Richardson and Mallon, 2005). For the most part, individual motivations for working abroad are described as an adventurous, youths seeking geographical mobility facilitated by self-learning and self-support (Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Vance, 2005; Inkson et al, 1997), regarding as a "backpacker culture" which is evident among young people (Inkson and Myers, 2003), especially for New Zealanders and Australians who view overseas experience as a "rite of passage" (Mason, 2002, p. 93). Later research by Richardson and Mallon (2005) found that the search for adventure and travel is the most influential initiative for all SIEs, despite of age, gender and children conditions. Their psychological mobility for exploration and novelty actually led to the physical movement (Birscoe and Hall, 2006). Sullivan and Arthur (2006) developed a 4 quadrants model, and those choosing to be an SIE are found in Quadrant four with both high physical and psychological mobility.

Other factors like family reasons, career opportunities, as well as financial improvements are subsidiary reasons. Further research by Richardson (2006) discusses family involvement in the SIE decision and finds the "centrality of personal relationships in this particular form of career decision". However, research on Australian managers by Tharenou (2003) indicates that marriage and family interest set up barriers to expatriation. Research from a small sub-group of four women following international careers indicates that family and personal life and not their careers are at the top of their priority list (Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007).

To summarize, there are a mixture of economic, cultural, family and career elements that operate as 'push' and 'pull' factors in the decision of SIE (Carr et al, 2005).

### **2.2.2 Information focus**

Due to the corporate mission they must pursue abroad, such as knowledge transfer or ensuring that headquarters' policies are carried out locally, the assigned expatriation commissions are among the most important objectives (Stahl et al., 2002) that require sound company-specific knowledge and social capital, which first needs to establish over time. As a result, those who are set to be assigned expatriates will focus more on internal company network so as to achieve better performance with in the organization. However, SIEs who pursuing a boundaryless career will not progress through the career stages in the same way as AEs do. In line with the above argumentation, it is to be expected that instead of waiting for an opportunity to be opened up by their employer, SIEs will autonomously look for a position abroad. Moreover, during

their staying abroad, they will probably focus more on the external information network outside the current company so as to gain more opportunity for self development and future career progress.

### **3. CROSS-CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT OF SIE**

In the case of assigned expatriation, the overseas job requires both knowledge of the company's strategy, procedures, etc., and the ability to work and live successfully in a foreign environment (Inkson, 1997). While expatriate assignment may be presented as a career opportunity (Oddou, 1991), and may facilitate short-term career progress, most returning expatriates report that the net effect is not positive (Oddou & Mendenhall, 1991). According to Napier and Peterson (1991), 40% of expatriates return early from their assignments. Birdseye and Hill (1995) and Engen (1995) report high rates of quitting the company by repatriates. The costs may be high—\$50,000 to \$150,000 for a failed expatriate assignment (Stephens & Black, 1991), and over \$250,000 for the loss, and replacement, of an employee leaving the company after return from assignment (Murray & Murray, 1986).

#### **3.1 Job reliance of SIE**

How to get through the culture paradox for a successful cross-cultural adjustment? Among those researchers, Osland (1995) is the first try to de-trivialize expatriate experience in the way of telling "tales told by expatriates". Expatriate experience is thus personalized, and takes on the rich texture of adventure stories in exotic locations. He uses "myth of the hero's adventure" to show how the expatriate heeds the call of adventure, push him or her self into the unknown world, goes through transformation and spiritual rebirth, and finally become the master of two worlds, which is called a successful cross-cultural adjustment. Osland's stories, collected from returned US expatriates, demonstrate that the cultural differences between home and the host land not only provide physical tests and obstacles, but also throw up paradoxes which provide the opportunity for cross-cultural learning.

In the case of self-initiated expatriation, the individual's career progress must be monitored much more closely by the individual itself than in case of long-term career planning by the organization. Existing research indicates that SIEs experience weaker job reliance than AEs when planning an international move. First of all, ties or responsibilities of SIEs are primarily to their own overall well-being rather than to their employer due to the boundarylessness career (Crowley-Henry, 2007). Second, long-term planning and a double sense of responsibility towards the home and the host company, as well as the package of monetary and fringe benefits (such as education/housing allowances, assignment and travel insurance) that are usually paid to AEs but not to SIEs (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010; Suutari and Brewster, 2000) can make it more difficult for AEs to break organizational links. Third, the achievement of specific company goals is less important for SIEs than for AEs since the sacrifice of leaving is also comparatively higher for AEs. SIEs usually ultimately leave the organization without having the expectation to return to it after the period of working internationally is completed.

#### **3.2 Personal agency of SIE**

As international organizations today compete in a more globally connected market place (Tarique et al, 2006), the global competencies of job candidates become more important (Vance, 2005; Yan, et al, 2002). Individuals cannot afford to depend upon organizations, but should be active agents in their own career development and assert themselves in developing and utilizing their global competencies (Hall, 2002). While AEs analyzed in their study value a foreign work experience for the better possibilities it offers for skill acquisition and personal development, SIE's identity is less based on their job or the organization they work for, as in the case of traditional careers, but is developed around skills and competencies. Accordingly, they are more prepared to make an inter-organizational move, which means that their foreign work experience is considered to be enhancing their internal rather than their external careers (Jokinen et al., 2008; Schein, 1996).

In sum, comparing AEs and SIEs, AEs expect company-supported career guidance, whereas SIEs assume sole responsibility for the planning and management of their career, taking more control, which means they have a greater responsibility to actively define success and make efforts to achieve it. The SIE are expatriates who already got a global mindset and more culturally aware and adaptable. Thus, they

probably have a better cultural-adjustment result and which in turn, is a precursor for success on an international assignment. Bringing in self-initiated expatriates who are highly qualified and skilled are crucial to business success, and international organizations should do more to develop appropriate strategies.

### **3.3 Self-value-adding process**

Globally competent managers are characterized by their ability to interact effectively with people who are culturally different, to deal with various competitive and political environments, and to see rapid change and uncertainty as an opportunity (Evans et al., 2002; Early and Ang, 2003).

Based on the career theory, SIE's career development is an outcome of complex forces, including individual self-direction as well as organizational career frameworks (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989). There is much evidence that this group of people "sculpt" their own careers rather than allowing themselves to become corporate sculptures (Bell & Slaw, 1989). The less long-term planning as compared to AEs may explain the stable and enduring career orientation at a later age. On one hand, SIE takes a proactive role in controlling his or her own life and in building company and cross-company expertise; on the other, individual career behaviors create organizational patterns and inadvertently build company expertise and shape company structures (Weick, 1996).

Generally, employees with a strong career orientation exhibit a deeper personal investment in their work and mark their achievements through upward movements within the occupational structure they work in (Heslin, 2005). Nevertheless, the career motive of SIEs becomes weaker with increasing age and at later stages of the career (Richardson and Zikic, 2007). It can be assumed that the career orientation remains stronger for SIEs than for AEs since the career progression of the former is less predictable due to more frequent changes of employers and a comparably lower career support by their employer.

## **4. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Companies nowadays always face the problem of adequate international managers in that assigned expatriate managers are often reluctant to be relocated to many different places (Mahroum, 2000). SIEs, on the contrary, can provide an extended pool with greater willingness to move to other countries throughout their careers while showing the same learning outcomes and career capital as AEs (Jokinen et al., 2008). In the context of boundaryless career, SIE forms a new basis for building competencies in individuals as well as in organizations in a way that their career become an "repository of knowledge" (Bird, 1996), which can enhance the transfer of knowledge between organizations. Thus, SIEs who can complete the overseas assignment competently and make organizational learning through the transfer of new skills and knowledge will experience advantages over AEs for both individual and organizational development. As a result, human resource management should make a shift from planning toward knowledge-centered approaches.

However, we must see clearly that this apparent advantage as planned and desired in many organizations could also turn out to be problematic since SIEs in nature lack the potential organizational reliance. As a consequence, a comparison of their career motivation to that of the group of AEs is of major interest for global organizations, in order to choose between assigned expatriates, SIEs, and local human capitals. From a corporate perspective, knowledge about career expectations and plans of SIEs in contrast to AEs is of importance in order to find out in how far the management of SIEs must differ from that of assigned expatriates.

Within the globalizing nature of our times, the very notion of international assignments is ever changing and expanding. This paper summarizes the characteristics of SIEs as a valuable alternative for assigned expatriates in that it is ponderable for organizations which aim to achieve competitive advantage on the global front. As careers change, and as the economy becomes increasingly global, SIE may become a more prominent option for international recruitment worldwide. It offers greater flexibility to leverage the career development of the individuals involved, and the competencies of specific organizations within which they move. Hence, there is a need for comparative studies of SIEs and AEs on the one hand and for a differentiation of research results according to their characteristics on the other. While contributing to existing theory by giving a theoretical framework of comparing SIE and AE on international adjustment, empirical testing is required to assess the effectiveness of this theoretical structure. To get helpful insights

about the investigated issue, both quantitative and qualitative research are needed to explore the experience of SIE and AE. First, quantitative data is necessary for the evaluation of both groups' adaptation to international environment, as well as to what extent do motivation and employee reliance have an effect on international adjustment in different areas. Besides, qualitative studies are useful in finding other factors that lie behind those adjustment differences as they offer better understanding of under-researched phenomena, and helps to explain some of the relationships within the analysis of the survey data.

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